Colonial Williamsburg's Architectural Fragments

Roberta G. Reid

Since the beginning of restoration work in 1928, the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation has collected architectural fragments to use in the reconstruction of its Historic Area buildings and as examples for reproductions. The rest were saved for future study. A written set of 10 standards known as the Decalogue dictated how the restoration would unfold. Two of the standards were directed toward architectural fragments, stating, "In restoration the use of old materials and details of the period and character, properly recorded, is commendable when they can be secured," and "In the securing of old materials there should be no demolition or removal of buildings where there seems a reasonable prospect that they will persist intact on their original sites."

The first component of the collection includes an assortment of hardware, doors, windows, balusters, moldings, pilasters, brick, and roofing taken from buildings in the Tidewater region. The architectural team of Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn, unfamiliar with regional 18th-century building practices when they arrived in Williamsburg, explored the Tidewater region in order to understand design elements, not only for existing Williamsburg buildings, but also where no physical evidence remained. According to Edward Chappell, current director of architectural research, "(the architects and draftsmen) were fascinated with the subtleties of moldings and recorded their observations in drawings, rather than text." They concentrated on the details, like learning a language.

Fragments were collected in the field from demolished, abandoned, or restored buildings and also purchased from agents. As Andrew Hepburn once reminisced, "the enthusiasm of the architectural crew and draftsmen who packed up on the weekends and scattered throughout the country finding examples of 18th-century design was **extraordinary**."

Fig. 1. Roberta Reid (left) with interns Barry Rakes (center) and Fay Peterson (right) accessioning architectural fragments from the Lenygon collection. Photo courtesy The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, July 1992, Architectural Collections Management.

"I need you to empty the room by next week," the restaurant manager stated. "It looks like your stuff." Curious, three of us from the Research Division went to the basement storage room he was talking about. There we found shingles, floorboards, flashing, locks, a shutter, bricks, and an old, twisted piece of flax. "The only original sash cord left from Wetherburn's Tavern," said the architectural historian. "The only 18th-century, red-and-white cord I've ever seen," he added. In an instant we had retrieved it. In another instant and to eyes anxious for the much-needed storage space, it may have been perceived as a tieback, kind of rumpled, without its tassels, and destined for the dumpster."

While the approach to the rules of the Decalogue may seem somewhat cavalier today, one can appreciate the pressure that the team worked under to restore and reconstruct an entire community.

Later, Paul Buchanan, director of architectural research from 1949 to 1980, studied minute details about the fragments he collected while restoring buildings. For example, at the Booker Tenement he described a badly deteriorated yellow poplar weatherboard by writing on a paper label: "This weatherboard was made by a 19th-century beading plane that was badly sharpened." To add to his description, Paul then carefully sketched the differences between a typical 18th-century profile, a 19th-century profile, and the fragment in question. Today, the Foundation's architectural historians continue to selectively collect fragments that have little hope of otherwise surviving.

The second assemblage includes English and other European architectural fragments, such as the Lenygon Collection, a group of carved moldings, doors, brackets, pilasters, and panels taken in the early 20th century from English manor houses. These fragments belonged to Francis H. Lenygon a prominent British interior designer and antiques dealer whose firm, Lenygon and Morant, decorated English and American buildings in the early-20th century (figure 1). Although frowned upon today, Lenygon stripped "period" rooms and installed them in fashionable American homes (figures 2 and 3). Our current research shows that most of the English manor houses were demolished.

Over time, Colonial Williamsburg's architectural fragments have rested forlornly in ware-

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Fig. 2. Fragments once considered worthless when piled in a warehouse begin to take on new meaning as research progresses. Here, the door from the Canary Lacquer Room (see below) has been placed in context: an exquisite 18th-century paneled room stripped from its manor house and available in the 1920s through the firm of Lenygon and Morant for $5,500. The unlabeled door meant little until the cardboard cutouts in the photograph were discovered in a long-forgotten box of folders donated along with the fragments in 1972. Interns continue to search for the name of the manor house. Photo courtesy The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, July 1992, Architectural Collections Management.

Fig. 3. A photographic record is made for each fragment accessioned into the Colonial Williamsburg Collection. Here, a 6' 8" 6-panel Chinese-flowered door from the Canary Lacquer Room is recorded using a 35mm camera set on a tripod against a paper backdrop. The door has been assigned an easily discernible accession number; the scale marked with 1" blocks provides an impression of size. Photo courtesy The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, July 1992, Architectural Collections Management.

houses, attics, and basements (all without climate control) and hung as office decorations. As years passed, many fragments suffered damage, became separated from their matching parts or identifying tags, and worse, ended up missing altogether. Only recently have we begun to identify and accession our heaps of mantels, doors, windows, moldings, and hardware.

The first step in giving appropriate recognition to the architectural fragments was to include them as a component of the Foundation's collections along with the buildings, objects, and furnishings. First, we defined our collection as "architectural fragments," those portions of a building detached from their original location, such as a chair rail removed from its wall or a door removed from its frame. The architectural fragments are considered above-ground features; archeologists lay claim to anything found below the ground. Fragments can be as small as a paint chip or as large as a fully-paneled wall. A procedures and practices statement, written by Thomas H. Taylor, Jr., architectural collections manager, was incorporated into the operating policies for the Office of Architectural Collections Management. This effort formally validated the significance of the architectural fragments as a collection.

Our most recent Foundation architect, Nicholas A. Pappas, had secured funding for the beginning of a survey and identification project for the architectural fragments, a project that took place in 1990 shortly before his retirement. Tom Taylor and I continued Nick's efforts by establishing a process of relocating and accessioning the fragments.

First, the most endangered portion of the collection was moved from its graveyard in an old bus garage and sorted by type in an unrestored building in the Historic Area. Then, using a laptop computer, we entered data into a database called "Notebook" while physically examining each piece. With a very disorganized group of fragments, the software streamlined our work by allowing unlimited text along with the ability to search and reorganize data. Over the course of a summer and with the assistance of two interns, more than 800 fragments were accessioned. We devised a system of numbering each fragment using a base coat of acrylic polymer emulsion varnish, then acrylic artists' color for drawing letters and numbers on each piece. When low light warehouse conditions prevailed, we switched from paint in a tube to a fine line, oil base, opaque paint marker for numbering. We then photographed each piece against a backdrop using black and white film and a 35mm camera mounted on a tripod.

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Colonial Williamsburg is only just beginning to conduct the research necessary to understand our fragments and their value as a study collection. As the transition to better storage conditions takes place, we will be looking at the fragments individually, as a group, and comparing the collection to similar groups of fragments elsewhere. Getting to know the discrete components of the collection has given us great appreciation for their craftsmanship and helped us to better understand 18th-century building technology. Historians have previously observed that the early restoration architects were rather selective in their observations of Tidewater buildings, focusing on well-resolved design aspects. Further study of our architectural fragments will assist in a better understanding of the architects' priorities.

In addition, we hope to use the knowledge gained from

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Fig. 3. Particularly in urban settings, historic buildings must be able to survive economically. In this case, the back bays of the Keith Albee Theater in Washington, DC, were demolished in the early 1980s to make way for a new office addition. When partial or total demolition of a historic structure is inevitable even after everything possible has been done to save it, both interior and exterior features could reasonably become part of architectural study collections. Photo: NPS files.

lition, salvaged features might be available for use in developing a study collection (figure 3).

The architectural study collection can play an important role in providing primary data to future researchers. But it should be remembered that however architectural features are acquired, the opportunity to learn from a property in its entirety naturally diminishes as features are separated and moved from their historic context (figure 4). Thus, acquiring any feature that conveys a property's history carries with it the responsibility to document, to care for, and to share the information it embodies with others. If collections are not initiated and developed within an ethical framework, they might well be fairly criticized as still another form of pillaging the past.

Kay Weeks is an author of *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings;* and *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties* (1992). Also active in heritage

Fig. 4. At Woodward Hill cemetery in Lancaster, PA, dozens of stone burial markers have been toppled in multiple acts of vandalism. The severity of the problem raises the provocative question as to whether to stabilize the broken markers in place or to document and remove them to a more protective, but less contextual, "collection environment." Photo by Patricia O'Donnell, ASLA/Charles A. Birnbaum, ASLA.

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these fragments to comprehend how people in the 18th century interacted socially in different interior spaces, a concept that the early architects were not trained to focus on. Fragments should provide us with clues about how social ideas and conditions changed over time. Rather than a running list of molding types such as egg and dart; egg and leaf; egg and tongue; egg, rose and dart; shell, rose, and dart; etc., we may end up with a better understanding of why certain choices were made to use a particular molding in terms of social and economic standing in the community.

Other museums seem to grapple with the same issues as Colonial Williamsburg when managing an architectural fragments collection. How does a museum give formal recognition to a fragments collection? What can we learn from architectural fragments? Do we need a national architectural fragments collection? Should standards be established for the care of architectural fragments? Are architectural fragments more or less threatened today? How are architectural fragments misused? The panel session on architectural fragments at the 1992 APT conference in Philadelphia generated a number of questions and comments about such collections. The Interiors Conference and Exposition for Historic Buildings II in February of 1993 then provided a convenient opportunity to follow up on the APT meeting. Twelve preservationists used a conference lunch break to talk about their interests regarding the status, use, and even misuse of architectural fragments.

A network of information, ideas, and questions regarding architectural fragments has proven highly useful to Colonial Williamsburg. The discussion will most likely continue in forum style at future meetings that bring preservationists together, such as the September APT conference in Ottawa.

Roberta Reid is assistant architectural collections manager and associate conservator at The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. She manages the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation's collection of architectural fragments and models. She chaired the panel session on architectural fragments at the 1992 APT conference in Philadelphia. Roberta inspects 600 buildings in the Historic Area and at Carter's Grove to insure their preservation and appropriate presentation to the visitor. She documents major maintenance projects and coordinates annual closings for repair work at primary exhibition buildings. Roberta conducts research and maintains a reference library of data related to architectural conservation. She also designs research projects for interns and supervises their work. If readers have an interest in architectural fragments or any questions about the ongoing discussions on this topic, Roberta will be happy to take your calls at 804-220-7740.

"Colonial Williamsburg's Architectural Fragments: The Forgotten Collection" presented at the Annual APT Conference, "Forward to the Past" in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, September 26, 1992, provided much of the material for this article.

WINDOWS THROUGH TIME

An Exhibit of American Windows from 1630s to 1930s

One impressive example of the way in which architectural artifacts can be studied and compared has been demonstrated in the travelling exhibit *Windows Through Time.* Featuring windows from over 12 different collections, this exhibit was originally developed in conjunction with The Window Conference for Historic Buildings held in Boston in 1986. Since then, it has been on display for extended periods of time in Boston, Washington, DC, Philadelphia, and New York City. It was most recently on display at the New York State Museum in Albany, closing in May 1993. The fold-out brochure, developed to accompany the exhibit, enables a comparison between window types by presenting photographs and histories of 16 windows selected from the exhibit together with drawings that match muntin profiles with datable windows.

More than 75 volunteers have assisted with the planning and display of the 4,000 square foot exhibit as it has traveled to different cities. To date nearly 100,000 people have toured the exhibit.

The exhibit was sponsored by the Historic Preservation Education Foundation and the National Park Service.

Using industrial piping and clamps, the modular exhibit was designed to be set up in variously sized exhibit spaces. The historic windows, together with photographs, drawings, and descriptive text were suspended on panels at viewer eye level to facilitate a careful examination. Photo by Richard Pieper.

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